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*This scene is from a puppet theatre adaptation of Alejandro Cruz Martinez's* The Woman Who Outshone the Sun/La mujer que brillaba aún más que el sol. *It was performed by adults and children from the 2007 Friends General Conference Annual Gathering with creative support from In the Heart of the Beast Mask and Puppet Theatre, Minneapolis, MN.*

# Contents

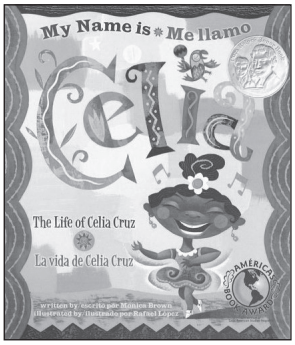
## Writing and Community

*Monica Brown*

# From a Writer's Perspective: Recreating Images of Community in Multicultural Children's Books

*Our family had a warm kitchen filled with the voices of women and men—grandparents, brothers, sisters, cousins, and friends. We ate rice, beans, and bananas and filled our bellies with love and warm coffee with milk and lots and lots of sugar.*

In my first picturebook for children, *My Name Is Celia Cruz: The Life of Celia Cruz/Me llamo Celia: La Vida de Celia Cruz* (Luna Rising, 2004), I wanted to fill children's eyes and ears with sensory images linked to family and home, evoking the simple yet loving and pleasurable upbringing of Celia Cruz, beloved Cuban American salsa singer extraordinaire. Such details are realistic ones for a Cuban family, yet the details help me to translate meaning across cultural traditions,




across borders, bringing communities across the globe into contact. The shared appreciation of Celia Cruz's talent certainly bridges cultures as well, but for young readers, yet unaware of Celia's remarkable contributions, I needed to find a way to explain what her homeland of Cuba meant to her, and how her memories of that island nation are inextricable from the warm memories of family and childhood.

As a writer of multicultural books for children, I have found that rich, sensory-laden language has the greatest potential for reaching readers unfamiliar with others' traditions. In *My Name Is Celia,* I return to this particular motif of family and food at the end of the book, further reinforcing these connections for my young readers. Trying to encapsulate the pull and appeal of an artist like Celia, I reiterated the way her music evoked a love for her family and culture, a love that was authentic and real, not fabricated:

*Teachers and presidents honored me, and all because my songs sounded like the waves of the ocean hitting the roof of my mouth, like the streets of Havana, like my mother's kitchen, like a tummy full of beans and bananas and rice, like a cup of warm coffee with sugar.*

I begin this brief profile of my writing in the Cruz family kitchen. In her kitchen, and in my own, where I do much of my writing, I found a common ground that builds a sense of global community. We all need to eat, to feel the pleasure and nourishment of food, and many of us trace our earliest talents, passions, desires, to the warmth of family, and if not, to the crucible of home. In writing my first four children's books, all bilingual (with four more in various stages of production with publishers), I have come to see that my writing is strongest when I honor the uniqueness of my subjects—not ignoring common ground, but not universalizing cultural difference.

Here, I want to discuss the way contemporary Latino/a children's literature, in particular my own, intervenes in both a history of exclusion in children's publishing and the cycle of stereotypical representations and children's stories about—though not by—Latinos/as. Given this perspective, as well as my own biography, it should come as no surprise that my subjects thus far have either been individuals who live between cultures and have a longing for remaining connected to both, or citizens of the world, whose reach is global and whose talent and intellectual and artistic contributions are boundless. With my bilingual children's books, I want to encourage and model for students the opportunity to work from a vantage point that affirms rather than tames or shames.

I grew up surrounded by the vibrant scrapes, swirls, and whirls of my mother's abstract paintings. My mother Isabel's paintings symbolically evoked the

memories, dreams, and landscapes of her childhood in Peru. She came to the United States in 1966, along with her two sisters, after her mother died and her father remarried. Though I grew up entirely in the Bay Area in California, throughout my life her art connected me to our family in Peru, along with the constant stream of cousins and tíos, crossing borders into and out of the United States. Surrounded by my tías (aunts) and primos/as (cousins) and an extended familial network of Peruvians, Central Americans, and Mexicans, I was raised to see myself a citizen of the world. Traveling back and forth between California and Peru, English and Spanish, I was a bridge between my South American mother and my North American father, my *abuelito* and my nana, my cousins from there and here, south and north, everywhere. I spent my first decade in the company of Irish, African American, Chinese, and Italian neighbors, my own cousins only blocks away.

My mother's Latino heritage was a part of everyday life, as was my father's Hungarian Jewish and Scot-Italian heritage. Though my friends laughed when my mother called, "*Moniquita*!" to come inside for dinner, I knew that our food was amazing, our music even better, and our artists and writers, world-class.

I had small glimpses, though, that not everyone felt this way. For example, there were moments when I realized that others formed judgments about my mother based simply on her accent and her beautiful Spanish-inflected English syntax. When I was 11, we moved to a more affluent neighborhood. When my mother opened the door to solicitors, they usually asked to speak to the woman of the house, never assuming that this black-haired, brown-skinned woman could be she. The only Latino/as in our new neighborhood were the gardeners and maids, and my mother was often mistaken for the latter. In elementary school, junior high, and high school, I was never exposed to the triumphs and accomplishments of Latinos/as. It wasn't until my experience at UC Santa Barbara that I heard that Chicano and Latino writers, some writing in Spanish and some writing in English, were being honored and recognized as important "new" voices in literary circles. My interest in such literature was further aroused by my then-interest in salvation theology and social justice causes with links to Central America.

My experiences in graduate school and as a university professor of Latino/a literature in the last decade have shaped my role as a writer for young children. Without a doubt, my scholarly research, my pedagogical explorations, and my creative writing are and have been inextricably linked to my sense of community and pride in my *mestisaje.*

The catalyst for the research that would become my first scholarly book, *Gang Nation: Delinquent Citizens in Puerto Rican, Chicano and Chicana Narrative* (University of Minnesota, 2002) is rooted in my work in (not just on) the community. While I was a master's student in Boston and working with high school students in Upward Bound programs on both coasts, it was my students of color who first drew my attention to the plethora of references to gang culture in music, fashion, film, literature, and the everyday reality of their lives.

The Latino/a literature I analyzed in *Gang Nation* intervened, if you will, at the location of violence and delinquency, addressing in particular the figure of the urban gang member and his/her intersections with our political, judicial, and cultural institutions. Texts such as Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* and Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* challenge stereotypical presumptions about Latino/a gang members and ask that we come to a deeper understanding of the links between youth violence and systemic, historically based racism, structural inequities, colonialism, entrenched poverty, failing education and health care systems, a debilitated infrastructure, and the existential despair that accompany these material conditions.

In my book, I attempted to understand how literary and popular representations of the figure of the Latino/a gang members shed light on how our culture constructs its notion of itself as a nation-state. What, I asked, can literature tell us about culture and how might we understand the cultural effects of the boom in consumption and artistic representation of urban gang youth?

In a later publication, through an analysis of contemporary Latino/a memoir and fiction, I explored the role of shame as an articulation of Latino/as subject position vis-a-vis dominant society and as an articulation of the processes of the external and internal colonization that persist within our communities. Feelings of shame, as I found in the autobiographical writings of authors such as Richard Rodriguez, Piri Thomas, Luis Rodriguez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Maria Arana, are linked to a history of colonization and to implicit assumptions about

inferiority—in intellect, in morals, and in ethnic or cultural identity and authenticity.

Latino/a literature is rife with testimonials illustrating the dynamic of shaming, offering indictments, complications, and paradigms of resistance that should be used in the classroom as pedagogical interventions for our Latino/a students. The perspectives of Latino/a writers affirm multiple literacies, and in my scholarly and creative work, I want all our students to see how language use—always deeply connected to cultural heritage and tradition—is affected by audience, rhetoric, location, and persuasion, and that being bilingual and using multiple voices are choices that can enhance, not limit, our abilities to communicate and to connect with others.

Today, as a writer of bilingual, multicultural books for children, I feel passionately that quality Latino/a literature can act as a mediation and a bridge—a powerful educational tool for teachers and teachers of teachers. I believe that storytelling can be an act of unwinding the narratives of shame, leading to resistance and revealing new forms of strength within the Latino/a community. I want my books to open minds and ears to the joy and power of words, decreasing cultural isolation and increasing pride, self-esteem, and a sense of possibility that Latino/as, too, can have public voice, an artistic voice, a space—a community—where their stories are honored and celebrated.

In writing for children, I look for a way to draw young readers in—through repetition, refrain, and, in some cases, an inspired action. This is nowhere more evident than in *My Name Is Celia/ Me llamo Celia,* a book focused on musicality, rhythm, and music's power to inspire. These hooks help me to establish a connection between the book (and implicitly the fictionalized narrator, Celia), the adult reader, and the child reading or being read to.

In the opening pages, my narrator asks her listeners/readers to imagine the sound of her voice and the music that backs her:

*SUGAR! My voice is strong, smooth, and sweet. I will make you feel like dancing. Close your eyes and listen. My voice feels like feet skipping on cool wet sand, like running under a waterfall, like rolling down a hill. My voice climbs and rocks and dips and flips with the sounds of congas beating and trumpets blaring. Boom boom boom! Beat the congas. Clap clap clap! go the hands. Shake shake shake! go the hips. I am the Queen of Salsa and I invite you to come dance with me.*

Synesthesia, using one sense to explain another, is the literary device I use to translate the aural experience of musicality into other bodily sensations that connect to the biographical facts of Celia Cruz's life. The process of comparison has its parallels in my opening example about my process for evoking Celia's warm feelings toward her home and Cuba: a tummy full of beans, bananas, rice, and café con leche, communicates domesticity and family—"home and love and lots of kisses."

The process of writing for children is an interesting one. Each published book of mine has gone through an intense revision process where I am winnowing, scaling back, choosing language that crystallizes meaning, language that suggests illustratable action for the painters whose brilliance illustrates my work. Feedback from editors about common concerns in publishing for children and my sensitivity to alternate political points of view have influenced the revision process as well. I have even had the unusual luxury of making editorial suggestions about illustrations at all stages of the process, particularly when such feedback tightens the vision of the book and creates a greater culture of inclusion.

I'll share one particular example of this complex process. I was obligated by Celia's story to write about her decision to leave Cuba during the revolution. Because my editor trusted my vision, she passed on my editorial suggestions to the illustrator of *My Name Is Celia,* Rafael Lopez. I insisted upon no guns and no bodily violence in the depiction of Celia's story, yet I still wanted to convey the pain and heartache of this historical period. This interchange resulted in what I believe is one of the book's most beautiful two-page spreads. Because I am not Cuban or Cuban American, I didn't want to reify a particular narrative of the Cuban Revolution, yet I wanted a description that had its foundation in fact. The final text read:

*I was still a young woman when a revolution began in my country. Like many others, I left my Cuba forever. First, I traveled to Mexico. Then I traveled to the United States with my husband, the trumpeter Pedro Knight, and our musical group Sonora Matancera.*

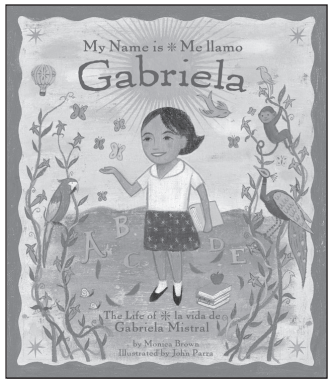
This spare, almost journalistic rendering is supported by the illustrations that carry more gravity and emotion than any

words can in this situation. We see Celia, eyes closed, clutching sheet music to her chest, floating toward Mexico (not, as people would assume, to the United States) and a new life, leaving part of her heart behind her in the burning cane fields. In the text, I wanted to suggest the ways her music will always take her and other Cubans back to their home communities. The unique combination of words and image ultimately focus attention on the consequences of the revolution rather than its merit, justification, and so on; that is, instead of offering political commentary on the revolution, it draws readers attention to its consequences for this one talented woman, perhaps a consequence shared by others. When Celia arrives in New York, the illustrator includes both the Cuban flag and the Statue of Liberty in his illustrations, which hints at the fact that Cuba was ever present in Celia's life. I write:

*New York! My new home with the lights and people—a blend of many cultures and traditions. From my window I saw the lights and heard the music, and I was the light and the music. Though I left my island and became a United States citizen, I carried my people in my heart. My songs were a gift to all those Cubans who left their island and all the children of the Americas.*

I have had the good fortune of having my first four books published in English and Spanish, so I am able to reach multiple communities simultaneously and demonstrate the way readers who know Spanish or English, or both to varying degrees, can share the same pleasure of a good story. When I visit elementary schools, I switch between English and Spanish and work on a few Spanish phrases with the English-speaking students. The rest of the day, I hear shouts of "Azucar!" in the hallways. Such moments make me feel as if the book's culminating lines have come to life: "When we sing together our words are like smiles flying across the sky."

In the case of my second book, *My Name Is Gabriela: The Life of Gabriela Mistral/Me Llamo Gabriela: La Vida de Gabriela Mistral* (Luna Rising, 2005), I wanted readers to know about the way Gabriela Mistral influenced generations of poets and the face

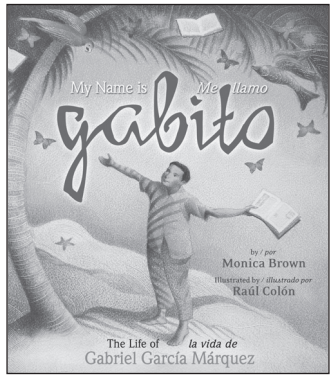



of education in Latin America. In order to tell this story of the first-ever Chilean woman to win the Nobel Prize, the poor daughter of a single mother, I touched on the cross-cultural experiences of taking joy in melodic language as a precursor to writing and enjoying/reading poetry. I also needed to translate poetic inspiration into an action scene that was illustratable. I wrote:

*I loved words—I liked the sounds they made rolling off my tongue and I liked the way they could express how I felt. When I saw a butterfly fluttering, I noticed the way the words fluttering butterfly sounded together like a poem!*

With my third picturebook biography, *My Name Is Gabito: The Life of Gabriel Garcia Marquez/Me Llamo Gabito: La Vida de Gabriel García Márquez* (Luna Rising, 2007), I also had a wonderful challenge. In a sense, I was writing a story about the imagination, about the creative process itself. How do you illustrate the concept of magical realism? I tried to engage children actively through the text, and to emphasize a recurring theme—repetition can aid children in learning to read—with the question, *"Can you imagine?"* The body of work by Gabriel García Márquez has reached a global audience, in part because of the wonder and mystery that unfolds in his narratives. This mode of writing, magical realism, cuts to the heart of historical and social realities but makes such aspects appear more clearly to us because of the estranging, destabilizing surprise and remarkable departures from the mundane. I made the decision to illustrate the power of magical realism by asking a number of rhetorical questions that also invite young readers to participate in the process of giving life to mysterious realities. I ask children:

*Can you imagine a shipwrecked sailor living on air and seaweed for eight days? Can you*



*imagine a trail of yellow butterflies fluttering their wings to songs of love? Can you imagine gold and silver fish swimming in air?*

These fantastically illustrated spreads and ideas are immediately followed with:

*Once, there was a little boy named Gabito who could. This little boy would become one of the greatest storytellers of all time.*

A few pages later, after examples of Gabito's expansive imagination and the amazing and magical world of his childhood—stories about ghosts, a 100-year-old parrot who told wild stories, and so forth—I give readers one particular way that Gabito quenched his thirst for knowledge and found food for future thought: his grandfather Nicolas's giant dictionary.

*From this dictionary, Gabito learned that magic is not just for witches, that gypsies are wanderers with a taste for adventure, and that words can be big and great and wild, too. The more words Gabito learned, the more stories he told.*

Implicitly this strategy commends and validates our capacity to dream and fantasize, something I believe all children need to do; so often parents and educators admonish children for daydreaming or spending too much time on fantasies. I believe that such fantasy/fancy has clear practical ramifications and a connection with reality as a commentary—social, economic, religious, political, or otherwise—on the way we lived our lives in the past, how we live in the present, and how we will live in the future. Such questions and flights of fancy know few political or cultural boundaries, and they build connections across peoples and traditions. For example, in my book I did not ignore labor and class—issues that children notice and comment about. Children's literature can offer a place to explore such concerns. The young Gabito sees injustice when he and his grandfather watch the workers on the banana plantations near Aracataca, Colombia:

*He saw how hard the people on the banana plantation worked picking fruit. Even to little Gabito, it didn't seem fair that those who worked so hard were so poor, and this made Gabito sad. He tried to imagine a world where no one was poor and where everyone could sit with their grandfathers under the shade of a tree.*

The adult García Márquez later wrote about this sort of exploitation in his novels. Despite my personal politics, I hope to avoid being didactic in my writing, thus leaving room for parents or teachers to discuss these topics with young readers, opening doors for deeper exploration in the future.

In my children's picturebook biographies, I've chosen to feature writers such as Cruz, Mistral, and Márquez because I want young readers to be inspired by the rich and imaginative legacies of these thinkers and of the transnational contributions of Latinos/as across borders. I have recently completed two new children's books: *Pelé, King of Soccer* and *Side by Side: The Story of Dolores Huerta and César Chávez,* coming from HarperCollins Rayo in 2009 and 2010, respectively. It is my dream that all students be emboldened and empowered to create their own narratives and find personal motivation to seek out books by and about these remarkable figures, whose lives were first known only to speakers of Spanish.

In my first published fictional illustrated children's book, *Butterflies on Carmen Street/ Mariposas en la Calle Carmen* (Piñata Books, 2007), I had the luxury of creating an incredibly confident Mexican American protagonist who lives in a community where all sorts of migrations are part of life's realities, and where complex identities and multiple communities are celebrated, not denigrated. Unlike so many books on young Latinas/os, Juliana isn't facing any particular problem, nor is she in need of advice, nor is she learning about a particular Latino tradition (as is the case with an early wave of Latino-focused books). Instead, Juliana is a lively grade-schooler who lives in a bustling neighborhood on Carmen Street, where her parents own La Esquina market, a place that sells everything from mango-chile lollipops and *pan dulce* to Spanish videos. For Juliana, life on Carmen Street is nurturing: her parents and grandfather love her, their store sells

what everyone wants and needs, she has a great teacher, and a lively best friend, Isabela. Carmen Street is her community and she knows her place in it.

She's inquisitive and excited about a class butterfly project in which her teacher, Ms. Rodriguez, is going to give every student in the class their own monarch caterpillar. Juliana's *abuelo,* her grandfather, inspires her further by telling her stories about Agangueo in Michoacán, Mexico, the place of his birth and the monarch capital of the world. He tells her:

*Every winter in Agangueo, the town where I'm from, in the beautiful mountains of Michoacán, Mexico, the butterflies come and make our little town a magical place, landing on trees and the roof of my little blue house.*

Juliana learns from Ms. Rodriguez and her grandfather's story that migration is a natural cycle; the butterflies migrate to survive.

The implications for human migration are present, but I chose not to make the links any more overt. While I made the decision to withhold overtly didactic commentary about immigration, it's clear that both Juliana's teacher and grandfather migrated for a reason, though the reasons are left open so that the discussion can take place among readers and parents or teachers. It's also clear that both Ms. Rodriguez, Juliana's abuelo, and others in the community love Mexico and its culture. Ms. Rodriguez, for example, validates Juliana's identity and her family's connection to Mexico: "I still remember the smell of the flowers, the sounds of the people, and the warm air against my face." Throughout the rest of the story, Juliana cares for her caterpillar as it metamorphoses, and though she regrets that it will fly away from her, she loves to imagine it heading toward her grandfather's hometown. She can picture her "Tiger" landing among the others, making the trees glisten gold. She knows that one day, too, she will follow. This story doesn't participate in the dialogue of shaming around issues relating to immigration; rather, it emphasizes love for culture, family, and home, and the way migrations, both human and butterfly, are part of our natural cycle of life.

It is my dream that my books become part of a rethinking of borders between people—be they geographic, national, or metaphysical. So, as you read my books as teachers and teacher educators, it is my hope that you experience the rhythm, the musicality, and the lyricism of language, the beauty and inspiration of the art. But I hope you do not stop there. I think Latino/a children's literature can provide all children the opportunity to grow in knowledge and understanding of their communities and others. It is my final hope that my writing can act as a bridge between communities, ultimately celebrating the connectedness of us all.

**Monica Brown** is a children's book author and associate professor of English at Northern Arizona University, specializing in U.S. Latino literature and multicultural literature. For more information on her work, go to www.monicabrown.net.